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The Epiphany of Our Lord (One-Year Series)

January 7, 2018

Text: Matthew 2:1–12

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus...a blessed Epiphany to you all!!

The coming of Wise Men is where we get all the fun stuff of Christmas. The stars on the top of many Christmas trees and the Christmas lights symbolize the star that guided the Wise Men to Christ in Bethlehem. The tradition of giving gifts reflects the Wise Men giving gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh; the shepherds and angels of Luke 2 had no gifts to bring except their wonder and worship.

Another profound difference between the coming of the Wise Men, Matthew 2, and the manger scene of Luke 2, is the different types of people involved. Luke's retelling of Jesus' birth and early childhood is very Jewish in nature. Joseph, Mary, Jesus, the shepherds, Simeon, and Anna the prophetess, are all Jews. The only Gentiles, non-Jews, mentioned in Luke's gospel are Caesar Augustus and Quirinius, governor of Syria. Otherwise, the whole thing is dripping with Judaism.

The Jews are the ancestors of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They are the insiders, those with inside information on how God promised to work His redemptive plan. They had the Law and the prophets; the promises of the coming Messiah were known to them: the seed of the woman in Genesis 3, the virgin birth of Isaiah 7, the Child born as Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace from Isaiah 9, and even the Ancient of Days who would shepherd God's people Israel from Micah 5.

And the angel did tell the shepherds that the Christ born in Bethlehem was good news for "all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10–11). The question is where are all the people? Where are the nations? Matthew's account of the coming of the Wise Men answers that question.

The coming of the Savior is simply too big for one nation, one people, or one culture. God the Holy Trinity is not a provincial deity. He is the God and Creator of heaven and earth. He upholds the universe and loves the world and the all the peoples of this

world. We need to be reminded of that today too. His redemptive plan is world-wide in design, universal in scope as Jesus will teach later. The Lord shines a star in the dark sky so that Wise Men, Gentiles from east can see and ponder. This miraculous star reveals to these stargazers that the King of the Jews is born, born for them! So they pack up their treasures and head west for Jerusalem, the city of Israel's kings.

Isaiah foresaw this journey of the nations to worship Christ the Lord. He writes, "...the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come" (60:5–6). The redemptive work of God began in Israel through the Jews. But it would not be limited to that one, small country in Palestine. The star was the beacon of light in the midst of a dark world. And the world will never be the same again. The Savior of the Nations is born; God was manifested in the flesh, seen by angels, and proclaimed to the world. Great indeed is the mystery of godliness (I Tim. 3:16).

There is a bit of historic irony in the journey of the Wise Men. You may recall that there was a Babylonian king named Nebuchadnezzar who in 586 B.C. completely plundered the Jewish people of their wealth and carried them back east to Babylon as slaves. Now, centuries later, Wise Men from that ancient kingdom are bringing their wealth back to the last and greatest Jewish King. And not only do they bring their treasures of gold, frankincense and myrrh, Matthew records that they "fell down and worshipped (Jesus)" (vs. 11).

Our Lord seems to delight in doing things in the most unexpected ways. Things like the Savior of the world being born of a Virgin girl, eternal life coming through death, victory achieved through defeat, God's wisdom hidden in foolishness; God's power cloaked under weakness – these are all examples of how our Lord loves to confound the wisdom of the wise and to exalt that which is considered foolish to unbelief. And we, His redeemed people, behold our Lord's wondrous works and marvel in faith and devotion. In that regard, we join the Wise Men in worshipping Christ the Lord.

But I've gotten ahead of the story. The Wise Men made a natural, understandable mistake. The star revealed that the king of the Jews had been born. They most reasonably concluded that he must be in Jerusalem, the Jewish capital. Most likely, he is a newborn son of Israel's current king, Herod the Great. But there was no newborn son in Herod's house. And Matthew records, in verse 3, that Herod and all Jerusalem were troubled at the news brought by the Wise Men. There was a saying that arose concerning Herod, "Better to be a pig in his stable than a son in his house." Herod

would kill anyone whom he thought capable of taking away his throne, including his children. He had murderous intentions for Jesus.

Herod doesn't know where the Christ would be born. He doesn't know the Scriptures, in part because He wasn't a Jew but mostly because he was not a true believer in the one true God of Israel. He calls in the priests and scribes so they can tell where the Christ is to be born. Micah 5 is read. Bethlehem, the city of David, Israel's greatest king, is the place of birth. In hypocritical, mock piety, Herod instructs the Wise Men to find the Christ Child and send word back to him so that he may go and worship Him too (vs. 8).

Dear saints of God, be wary of any form of religiosity or flattery about the Lord Jesus that pays no heed to the truth of His Word. I have in mind here people who claim the name of Jesus but do not follow His Word, who do not seek out His grace, love, and forgiveness in the ways He desires to share it: through His Gospel, through His Sacraments, through His Church gathered around those divine gifts of Word and Sacraments to offer worship, prayers, and thanksgiving. Any denial of God's Word is a denial of Jesus. Fix your eyes upon Jesus as He revealed in His Word. His Word is truth unto life and salvation, now and forever.

With the guidance of the star and God's holy Word, the Wise Men travel the short distance to Bethlehem. Although Jesus is no older than two years of age, He is in fact the Savior of Jews and Gentiles alike. Upon arriving at Joseph and Mary's house, these grown men of education, wealth, and culture fall down in worship and offer gifts of praise and thanksgiving: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. "And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising" (Is. 60:3). It's one of the most powerful and moving events in the Gospel.

Dear saints of God, we are part of the nations represented by the Wise Men. We are Gentiles, non-Jews, who are also fellow heirs and members of the body of Christ. You are partakers of the promises of Christ Jesus through the Gospel even though our earthly lineage cannot be traced through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jesus is the King of the Jews and Lord of all nations. What the angel promised the shepherds is now come true. The good news of Christ's birth is received by the Gentiles who worship Christ and give gifts in thanksgiving and praise. And that good news that is "for all the people" continues to go out to you, me and to our world; both Jews and non-Jews alike.

This very week, Rev. Doug Thompson and his wife Angie, are traveling to Sierra Leone. His task is to establish seminary education in Sierra Leone. Our congregation has committed herself to supporting this work of bringing the light of God's Word to a Gentile nation. To that end, the Thompsons will be in our congregational prayers regularly throughout this year. And part of your offerings will go to support their work of bringing the light of Christ into West Africa.

And for us here in the United States, the light of God's Word is needed all the more. Our homes and families need the bright beams of truth to shine into every heart, mind, and soul. This year, bring not only your gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but also your our whole heart, mind, and body. Christ is the Lord of all. We are His redeemed people, people who walk in the light of God's Word purely preached. May Christ's name and His Word dwell richly in us to the praise and His glorious grace and the growth of His kingdom among us.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.